

What to Look for in a High-Quality, Inclusive Pre-Kindergarten & Kindergarten Prosocial Learning Environment



One of the greatest benefits for children experiencing high-quality early education with other children is that he or she has the opportunity to develop his or her social skills. It is well known that children who can make and keep friends with adults and with other children are more likely to be successful in school and in life (Ladd, 2005). High-quality early learning environments offer ongoing opportunities and supports for ALL children to develop appropriate “prosocial” skills.

What are “prosocial” skills?

The behaviors that we want children to exhibit – such as sharing and helping – are often called “prosocial” behaviors. Our ideas about what these behaviors look like are influenced by our own cultural beliefs and our knowledge of child development. Teachers, administrators, families and other adults working with young children often find it much easier to describe the behaviors that they DO NOT want to see children exhibiting. It is more effective to identify and describe the behaviors that they DO want children to use when interacting with others.

In general, we would like young children to learn to:

- Be respectful of themselves and others
- Work and play alone and in groups
- Solve conflicts using words
- Express strong emotions in acceptable ways
- Make decisions ethically and intelligently



In order to exhibit these prosocial skills, young children need to develop the following abilities as outlined in Foundations: Early Learning Standards for North Carolina Preschoolers (2004, NCDPI) and the North Carolina Kindergarten Standard Course of Study.

Children start out developing prosocial behaviors by developing a “sense of self.” They begin to:

- Show self-confidence, persistence, self-direction
- Regulate, recognize, and express emotions
- Enjoy playing alone and with others
- Cope with change and adversity
- Express and manage anger appropriately
- Use pretend play
- Distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behavior

As children grow and learn, they develop a “sense of others.” They begin to:

- Approach others easily and show comfort in interactions
- Seek out others for help
- Develop awareness of personal behavior
- Work to resolve conflicts
- Show interest in others; responding to their feelings, recognizing and respecting similarities and differences
- Follow social rules, routines, and daily schedules

PROMOTING PROSOCIAL BEHAVIORS

Indoor and Outdoor Learning Environments

- Attend to placement of well-defined centers and traffic patterns
- Offer multiples of popular materials and toys
- Ensure predictable routines and smooth transitions with little waiting time
- Place “sign-up” sheets in centers and a picture schedule that children can follow
- Provide quiet and active areas and activities throughout the day
- Adapt activities and give opportunities for choice
- Help children define personal space and provide a safe, observable place where a child can be alone when needed
- Display books, pictures, and posters about feelings and problem solving
- Provide settings, materials, and activities that promote interaction and cooperation
- Provide both sunny and shady areas in the outdoor learning environment

Adults

- Have appropriate expectations, clear limits, logical consequences
- Communicate these expectations in multiple, clear ways. Tell and show children what you WANT them to do, not always what you don't want them to do
- Offer opportunities for children to practice prosocial behaviors
- Acknowledge when they do behave

Appropriately in a genuine manner, using descriptive language

- Develop partnerships between the child's family members and teachers
- Discuss family and school behavioral expectations
- Know what "pushes our buttons" and ask for help
- Remain calm, avoid blame, and try to understand the child's perspective
- Teach/model appropriate behaviors, words, social skills/rules:
 - Reflect on what children are doing
 - Label their feelings
 - Ask open ended, action questions; give suggestions
 - Encourage children to make classroom rules, e.g., "use walking feet;" "be a friend"
 - Have real conversations with children – show that you really care about them
- Offer adequate opportunities for outside play to diffuse energy

For the children

- Discover and use their interests, learning styles, temperaments
- Know their developmental abilities and build on these
- Examine their physiological needs: fatigue, hunger, allergies, and need for movement
- Help them to learn to self-regulate
- Teach them to express themselves, especially their strong feelings using words or other communication systems. You may have to actually give them the appropriate words, phrases, and behaviors to communicate their emotions and ask for what they need.
- Make social story books where the children talk about helping, being friends with one another, and solving problems

When adults have used environmental and positive behavior supports for at least three months and a young child continues to display particularly challenging behaviors, parents and professionals should work together to make appropriate referrals to specialists such as the Exceptional Children's program within a local education agency.

References and Resources

- Brault, L. & Brault, T.** (2005). *Children with challenging behavior: Strategies for reflective thinking*. Phoenix, AZ: CPG Publishing. 1-800-578-5549.
- Center for Evidence-Based Practices: Young Children with Challenging Behavior.**
<http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu>
- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning.**
<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel>
- www.challengingbehaviors.org.** Excellent web site with downloadable strategies and supports.
- Conscious Discipline.** Becky Bailey, PhD. Loving Guidance, Inc.
1-800-842-2846. <http://www.consciousdiscipline.com>
- "Foundations of Early Learning Standards for NC Preschoolers and Strategies for Guiding Their Success"** (October 2004). NC Dept. of Public Instruction. <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/success/downloads/foundations.pdf>
- Ladd, G.** (2005). *Children's peer relations and social competence: A century of progress*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lucy Daniels Center for Early Childhood.** Cary, NC.
<http://www.lucydanielscenter.org>
- N.C. Department of Public Instruction (2009). *North Carolina Guide for the Early Years Second Edition*. Raleigh, NC: Author.
- N.C. Department of Public Instruction. *NC Standard Course of Study, K-12*.
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/>
- Partnerships for Inclusion, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.** UNC-Chapel Hill.
<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~pfi>
- Project Enlightenment.** Raleigh, NC. <http://www.projectenlightenment.wcpss.net>
- Reframing Discipline and Preventing Discipline Problems.** Videos from Educational Productions.
1-800-950-4949. <http://www.edpro.com>
- Second Step.** Curriculum developed by the Committee for Children, an international nonprofit organization located in Seattle, Washington. Contact Committee for Children, 1-800-634-4449.
<http://www.cfchildren.org>
- "Young Exceptional Children (monograph series), Practical Ideas for Addressing Challenging Behaviors"** <http://www.dec-sped.org> (look under publications, monograph series).

Visit the North Carolina Office of Early Learning Demonstration Programs to see evidence based practices at work. <http://www.ncprek.nc.gov/DemoSites/DemonstrationProgram.asp>

Contributors: Patsy Pierce, Ph. D., Center for Literacy and Disability Studies, UNC-CH, Trish Mengel, National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, Pat Porter, Ph.D., CLDS, and Norman Allard, Ph.D., Dan Tetreault, Janet McGinnis, Eva Phillips, and Cindy Bagwell, Ed.D., Office of Early Learning, DPI.

SPONSORED BY:



Public Schools of North Carolina

State Board of Education | Department of Public Instruction
Exceptional Children Division | Mary N. Watson, Director
Office of Early Learning (Pre-K – Grade 3) | John Pruetto, Director